



Charles County Government

CHARLES COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

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April 25, 2017

Pete K. Rahn, Secretary
Maryland Department of Planning
7201 Corporate Center Drive
P. O. Box 548
Hanover, Maryland 21076



Dear Secretary Rahn:

Thank you for meeting with representatives of Charles and Prince George's counties on March 23, 2017 at MDOT headquarters in Hanover to discuss the results of the Southern Maryland Rapid Transit (SMRT) Study and next steps for the project. Based on the results of the meeting, we have several follow-up points that we ask you and your staff to address.

We request that the Final Report and Recommendations of the Study reflect the findings and conclusions of the experts on the consultant team, and the members of the technical and steering committees, who have spent the past three years engaged in the following tasks, at a cost of more than \$3 million in public funds. The findings of the Study were based on the team's careful analysis of:

- Updated ridership forecasts
- Engineering of the detailed alignment and transit station locations
- Projected economic impact of the project
- Updated cost estimates
- Evaluation of the pros and cons of the two mode options, BRT or LRT

This is the fifth study of rapid transit service in the MD 5/U.S. 301 corridor between the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station and Charles County that has been completed in the 29 years since the elected officials of the Southern Maryland region presented their first request for State action on this priority to Governor William Donald Schaefer in 1988. We hope and expect the final recommendations to be consistent with the findings of the experts who were commissioned by the State to carry out this comprehensive analysis.

At the conclusion of the SMRT Study, it became evident to the project team that the projected ridership forecasts, and projections of economic impact, favored light rail transit (LRT) as the most responsive and suitable mode for delivering high-capacity, fixed-route transit service in this corridor, and the only mode capable of addressing the long-term growth in ridership that is expected after the design year when the system becomes operational.

We understand your concerns regarding the higher estimated capital cost of LRT over BRT. However, we would point out that the "annual operations costs" of BRT as shown in the Study results are 30 percent higher than LRT, not including

the cost of replacement vehicles. The “Key Ridership Conclusions” section of the 2016 SMRT Alternatives Report states by 2040, BRT would need to operate in 3-bus platoons at 6-minute headways to handle peak loads, but would result in BRT annual operating costs 25 to 50 percent higher than for LRT.

LRT is also the transit mode preferred by the elected officials of Charles and Prince George’s counties, and by the public, as expressed in numerous meetings and in comments received by the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) on the draft Final Report during the public forum and comment period. A report summarizing the public comments received should be appended to the SMRT Final Report.

For these reasons, we expect LRT to be recommended as the preferred transit mode in the Final Report of the SMRT Study. In addition, we understand from the March 23rd meeting that Alignment Alternative 4, and Beltway (I-495) Crossing Option 8A, will be recommended in the Final Report, which we support. This will ensure the most cost-effective Beltway crossing and access to the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station, and will provide for the location of a transit station near the main gate of Joint Base Andrews, a key commuter destination, employment and activity center, and focal point for future TOD on the proposed 18.7-mile SMRT alignment.

We are very concerned that MDOT’s new Consolidated Transportation Program (CTP) proposes that work on this project be suspended for six years, until FY 2023. After nearly 30 years of successive studies have proven the feasibility and benefit of implementing this project, work has been repeatedly suspended and progress halted, until local and regional political pressure compelled further action—in the form of another study.

Not only are transit needs in this congested and rapidly growing highway corridor steadily increasing, it is vitally important that a 70-foot, grade-separated transitway for future high-capacity, fixed-route transit service be preserved and integrated with improvements that the State Highway Administration is planning. SHA has been waiting for the results of the SMRT Study before finalizing their own recommendations for MD 5. A six-year delay in beginning the formal “Project Planning/NEPA” phase of the SMRT project could result in a corresponding delay in the preservation of the transitway. Without prompt State action, additional growth and development could close the door on this project forever.

We strongly urge you to respect the integrity of this three-year Study and reconsider your decision to alter its findings and conclusions regarding mode selection. The Final Report of the SMRT Study should accurately reflect the experts’ finding that in view of future peak-period ridership forecasts, it is likely that BRT operations would fall short of the level of service required. LRT would be the mode most capable of meeting the transit needs of this corridor beyond the design year and into the future, and would deliver a significantly higher economic return on investment, more jobs, and more revenue to the State and local governments, sufficient to pay for the construction of the system.

And we strongly urge you to reconsider your decision to suspend work on this project until FY 2023. Southern Maryland is the only region of the State west of the Chesapeake Bay without access to some form of passenger rail transit—Metrorail, MARC, Amtrak or light rail. Our citizens deserve the same quality of transit service that other regions of Maryland have enjoyed for decades. A six-year delay in starting the next phase of this project could jeopardize the State’s preservation and acquisition of critical right-of-way in the MD 5 corridor. Preservation of a dedicated transitway will be vital for future construction of the SMRT project. Without it, you will be putting at risk the creation of a truly integrated, multi-modal transportation strategy for the MD 5/U.S. 301 corridor.

Sincerely,



Peter F. Murphy, *President*

On behalf of the Board of the County Commissioners of Charles County, Maryland

Cc: Governor Larry Hogan, Jr.
Paul Comfort, MTA Administrator
Greg Slater, SHA Administrator
Mel Franklin, Prince George's County Council
Victor Weissberg, Prince George's County DPW&T